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AUTHOR Hand, Nigel
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ABSTRACT

The thinking of D. W. Winnicott, pediatrician, psychoanalyst and gifted writer, provides the most effective validation of every kind of devoted labor in literature and the arts which is currently available. Winnicott is important because he has formulated a theory of development which makes creativity central and intrinsic to human nature. One of Winnicott's important statements is that the transitional object is the first manifestation of both creative play and of symbol-making. Winnicott argues not only that we must always struggle to redefine our own sense of the relationship between inner and outer, perception and apperception, but that the transitional object is the prototype of all later cultural activities. The general statement that can be made is that cultural activity is not an adornment to be added to life--it is what life is about. (AEF)

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D. W. Winnicott: the Creative Vision

by

Nigel Hand

The College of St. Mark and St. John
Plymouth, Devon, UK

"In creative living you and I find that everything we do strengthens the feeling that we are alive, that we are ourselves."¹ In these unpretentious but compelling words we hear the characteristic idiom of D. W. Winnicott, the pediatrician, psychoanalyst and gifted writer whose work is best known through the collection of papers entitled *Playing and Reality* (1971), and whose thinking, I suggest, provides the most effective validation of every kind of devoted labor in literature and the arts which is currently available to us. Though seemingly unadorned, Winnicott's style is highly distinctive. His writings are fresh, sinewy and alive - alive with that sense of thinking and living creatively which is one of his central preoccupations. Modestly conceived, the notion of "living creatively" would be exemplified, according to Winnicott, if one were to take some sausages and cook them not merely as Mrs. Beeton or Clement Freud direct, but "somehow to cook sausages for the first time ever."² The full and startling scope of his conception, on the other hand, begins to come home to us when he writes that "Creativity... is the retention throughout life of something that belongs properly to infant experience: the ability to create the world."³

If this formulation reminds us that Winnicott was a psychoanalyst by training, what has to be noted is his radical **refashioning** of a number of received Freudian notions. In "The Location of Cultural Experience", for instance, Winnicott writes that "Freud did not have a place in his topography of the mind for the experience of things cultural."⁴ Winnicott's contribution has been not merely to chart cultural experience on to the psychoanalytic map of the mind, but to show that from first to last creativity is **constitutive** of the human psyche. In doing so he has overturned the reductive Freudian notion that cultural activity is always a secondary manifestation of primitive instinctual drives. Winnicott is important to us because he has formulated a theory of development which makes creativity central and intrinsic to human nature, to the way in which we become ourselves. He shows that cultural activity is neither *faute de mieux*, nor an optional extra: it is, rather, what life is about. For the adult, as for the infant, life is what it is because of our "ability to create the world".

How does Winnicott's theory give definition and substance to these large claims? What we find in the first place is that his ideas are built on the fascinating account he gives of the earliest stages of individual existence. When he declared in a typical paradox that there is "no such thing as an infant," Winnicott was not only pointing to the obvious truth that a baby has no organized identity of its own, but he was saying that in normal circumstances what is there to begin with is the "nursing couple". The essence of this initial state of affairs is that the "good enough mother" ministers to the baby in such a way that he or she gets started in life through the illusion that the world is his own creation. While the baby is in a state of total dependence his needs are met as if by magic - so that, paradoxically, he lives in the illusion of his own omnipotence. The way in which the mother presents herself **answers** to the infant's unshaped conception of what would meet his need at the given moment.

Shakespeare's King Lear is an old man who in many respects begins to outgrow this phase of existence only during the last tragic days of his life. As a rule, of course, we grow up at a somewhat earlier age. How then is the transition from the infantile illusion of omnipotence to a bounded sense of identity normally effected? Winnicott's account of this transitional phase of human development is the intellectual contribution which has made his name known beyond the pages of psychoanalytic journals. If there is at first a near-complete adaptation to the baby's needs on the part of the mother, her "main task", thereafter, "is disillusionment".⁵ That is to say, she will gradually "fail" her adaptation - in a way which intuitively introduces the baby to "reality". If the initial union of mother and child were to be symbolized by two concentric circles (the baby's inside the mother's), then as a result of the process of "disillusionment" the child has become an autonomous individual when the circle of his existence can be taken to be **outside** his mother's: he has emerged from the mother's embrace and acquired a bounded and finite sense of

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his own identity - and of a "not me" world beyond him. Meanwhile, however, we can picture an intermediate phase where the two circles overlap - suggesting the traditional image of a Venn diagram, with a shaded area common to the two circles. In Winnicott's terms this gives us a figure for the union of the mother and infant at the point, in time and space, of their separation. What Winnicott famously calls the "transitional object" (or "phenomenon") is the symbol of this union-in-separateness of mother and child.

What Winnicott has in mind here is the special object - a teddy bear, a dummy, or simply the fluffy corner of a blanket - which he refers to as, among other things, the infant's "first not-me possession". He uses the term "phenomenon" as well as "object" to indicate that intangibles such as sounds ("mum-mum") may fulfill the same function in many cases. One of Winnicott's all-important statements is that the transitional object is the first manifestation of both creative play and of symbol-making. Of equal and correlative importance is the implication that imaginative play is therefore intrinsic to the process whereby the infant begins to establish his own identity. Moreover the developments which are initiated here will never be resolved in any conclusive way, for the paradox of the transitional object is that it is both "subjective" and "objective, both "created" and "found" - and this borderline territory, this "third area", between inner and outer will always be part of our experience.

Winnicott argues not only that we must always struggle to redefine our own sense of the relationship between inner and outer, perception and apperception, but that the transitional object is the prototype of all later cultural activities. In a remarkable coinage he refers to the "area" of overlap between mother and child, symbolized by the transitional object, as a "potential space". Towards the end of the paper on "The Location of Cultural Experience", Winnicott writes:

I have tried to draw attention to the importance both in theory and practice of the third area, that of play, which expands in creative living and into the whole cultural life of man. The third area has been contrasted with inner or personal psychic reality and with the actual world in which the individual lives, which can be objectively perceived. I have located this important area of **experience** in the potential space between the individual and the environment, that which initially joins and separates the baby and the mother when the mother's love displayed or made manifest as human reliability, does in fact give the baby a sense of trust or confidence in the environmental factor.⁶

If I have given no more than a minimalist sketch of Winnicott's contribution, it may nevertheless be sufficient to show that the theory can have a number of powerful effects on our thinking. The general statement that can be made is that cultural activity is not an adornment to be **added** to life - it is what life is about. The experiences which take place in the third area, the potential space between ourselves and our world, are what makes life seem significant and worthwhile. Continuous as they are with the creative processes which first gave us a hold both on ourselves and our world, these experiences - because they renew our sense that we have "the ability to create our world" - are at the heart of the feeling "that we are alive" and "that we are ourselves." Moreover the theory not only points the way out of the cul-de-sac where cultural activity is thought of, however piously, as an optional extra, but it releases us at the same time from thinking of creativity in terms purely of the individual. Though it emerges from the psychoanalytic tradition, Winnicott's theory is profoundly social in its bearings. Creativity is, from the first, intrinsic to what makes us members of the human community, so that the responsibility of the educator is not merely to "stimulate" the individual, but to foster the third area - for it is only within this realm, this uniquely human dimension, that we can come into creative possession of our imaginative - and intellectual - experiences.

There is a well known poem of Wordsworth's, entitled "We Are Seven," which puts us in touch with the nature of the third area more effectively perhaps than any discursive summary. In the poem an adult narrator encounters "a little cottage girl" with whom he enters into a dialogue, which begins in this vein:

"Sisters and brothers, little maid
How many may you be?"
"How many? seven in all," she said,
And wondering looked at me.⁷

Though the adult is the enquirer the "look" of the child perhaps signals that it is the adult whose attitude will be most brought into question in the poem. The continuation of the dialogue reveals that the little girl counts a brother and a sister who are dead, and buried in the churchyard where she often plays, among her "seven." While the narrator vainly endeavors to prompt her to revise her total, the achievement of the poem lies in the way it creates the realm (entirely removed from naivete or sentimentality) in which for her they **are** seven. The adult wishes the child to make an unambiguous distinction between the subjective and the objective aspects of her experience, but she is inhabiting that "potential space" where the two are creatively and intrinsically intertwined. The incomprehension of the adult, we note, is inseparable from his inability, or refusal, to enter into the child's play:

"The first that died was little Jane,
"In bed she moaning lay,
"Till God released her of her pain,
"And then she went away.

"So in the churchyard she was laid,
"And all the summer dry,
"Together round her grave we played,
"My brother John and I.

"And when the ground was white with snow,
"And I could run and slide,
"My brother John was forced to go,
"And he lies by her side.

"How many are you then," said I,
"If they two are in heaven?"
The little Maiden did reply,
"O Master! we are seven."

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
"There spirits are in heaven!"
'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will
And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

In "The Location of Cultural Experience" Winnicott writes:

An essential part of my formulation of transitional phenomena is that we agree never to make the challenge to the baby; did you create this object or did you find it conveniently lying around? That is to say, an essential feature of transitional phenomena and objects is a quality in our attitude when we observe them.⁸

Of the narrator in "We Are Seven" we feel that he has attempted to dismantle the ambiguity of the child's experience in a way which runs counter to our best intuitions. He is a forerunner of Mr. Gradgrind, and a progenitor of the utilitarian calculus which so often threatens our work. Winnicott has said that "in considering these (transitional) phenomena we must recognize the central position of Winnie the Pooh." In the opening pages of *Winnie the Pooh* we enter a realm not only where Christopher Robin comes bumping down the stairs with the archetypal transitional object, but where, as we may all recollect, the adult narrator (unlike Wordsworth's in "We Are Seven") adopts just that attitude towards the situation which is subtly

and intuitively responsive to its ambiguity. The stories are of course one of the most engaging celebrations of the human phenomena which Winnicott has drawn to our attention. They are also a wonderful model for the kind of responsiveness, understanding and responsibility which is required in order to keep alive the kind of humanity which they embody.

Footnotes

- ¹ D. W. Winnicott, "Living Creatively", in *Home Is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (Pelican, 1986), p. 43.
- ² *Op. cit.*, p. 51.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ⁴ D. W. Winnicott, "The Location of Cultural Experience" (1967), in *Playing and Reality* (Tavistock, 1971), p. 95.
- ⁵ D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena", in *Playing and Reality* (Tavistock, 1971), p. 13.
- ⁶ "The Location of Cultural Experience", pp. 102-3.
- ⁷ Wordsworth W., "We Are Seven", in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (Methuen, 1973), p. 66.
- ⁸ "The Location of Cultural Experience", p. 96.

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- D. W. Winnicott, *Home Is Where We Start From: Essays by a Psychoanalyst* (Pelican, 1986).
D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (Tavistock, 1971).